

March 4, 1975

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Dear Harriet,

While you were enjoying yourselves discussing the science indicators manuscript and particularly having the benefit of Yehuda's company, I was going through a rather stressful experience at Asilomar as you might have predicted. There was so much "sociology" going on that I really do regret that you were not able to be there. You would certainly have been fascinated by the substance of the events and even conceivably might have been willing to make a contribution, potentially an enormous one, to the clarity of the outcome.

I have been in some turmoil over the whole matter and as a way of helping to set my thoughts straight have dictated a number of memoranda for my own benefit which, however, I think I should share with you as the beginning of a historical inquiry. It is really important that those tapes be on the record, and I will indeed be communicating with Stetten to ensure that he sees some way of keeping them preserved. I do not know what argument there might be for them to be part of the public record if there were to be some scholarly interest in them and I suspect it would not be too difficult to get permission to listen to them provided they were not explicitly rebroadcast. Certainly the news reporters were also permitted to keep their own taperecorders on during the entire proceedings.

I am going to note here also certain other documents that should be included in the package to be mailed to you. They include the initial letter to Science; the invitation to the meeting; part or all of the Ashby Committee report; the task force reports and the final provisional one. I will also have a few newspaper clippings that bear on some of the discussion and a few miscellaneous notes of my own that I had taken as I went along. I hope this is not too technical for you to understand the gist of what was really going on from the standpoint of the social and political issues. I very much feel the need for some further critical dialogue to try and help sort out some more of the very complicated issues that were being exchanged there. It really was rather bewildering and I am still not certain that I understand everything that was going on quite apart from not being privy to all of the factual inputs relevant to the situation. It seems in fact as if Paul Berg is really quite angry with me for what may have seemed like *obedient* behavior on my part; I have to say that I think he has been less than candid with me in informing me of all the considerations that were in his mind in trying to seek the ends that I have been analyzing in the attached memoranda.

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I also have the sense that he is less than fully sensitive in his foresight about the way in which good intentions will become translated into public understanding and into bureaucratic enforcement. We still have to see what the outcome of that is going to be. Fortunately, there are at least one or two members of the advisory committee who are more concerned about that than Paul is, for he does have his own agenda and who told me they were indeed grateful to me for having raised a number of the fussy issues that I summarized in the memorandum. So, perhaps all they come out just right in the long run as a result of that dialectic. Certainly that is the best I can hope for!

What is still not really very clear is how this will become a precedent for many other forms of regulatory behavior that are bound to be imposed on us as time goes on in response to various other kinds of public pressure - perhaps even just for relevance! Certainly it is already clear that bio-hazard and safety is going to be the surrogate for a large number of other evaluative considerations and while we have already had some of this in peer review according to scientific merit, I suspect we are going to see other conditions of a tight budget and many other restraints on the growth of science more and more critical determination by various people of what other people are going to be doing in their scientific work. For that reason I am very much preoccupied with matters of process and I am not sure at all that I am too happy about the way things went here, although it is probably easier to understand them if one has access to all the input data. We certainly see a far reaching criticism of scientific activity that, as I have already said, goes even beyond the existing pattern of peer review and that will have many other intersections with outside interests and we have been accustomed to see in the past. I am sure we are going to be seeing much more of this in the future on a wide variety of other considerations although the public safety is obviously the most obvious catchword on which to embark on such a process.

I would indeed be grateful to you for your own comments or questions or conceptual formulations and in particular hope you might call me up after you had a chance to digest some of this, so we might pursue it a bit further.

I am conscious of the other obligations that I have been less able to fulfill as a result of interventions of this kind and will certainly do my best to meet them.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr  
Enclosures